

"I see," Julian groaned, reaching out for her in the dark room, and Sara let herself be pulled to the bed.

Sara was supposed use this time up north to focus only on the project and not think about the stretch that would come after January, the push towards finishing that she wasn't sure she had in her. She didn't tell Julian that she'd blown through most of her grant money already, and she didn't mention the meeting she'd skipped with the foundation director. Those concerns seemed far away from her life with Julian; she had only to pack their snacks for the car ride to Sebastopol, to tuck apples and tight-skinned mandarins into a grocery bag, some of the protein bars Julian liked, to feel that life could be ordered and safe. To feel the press of his hand on her thigh while they drove was an anchor against the drift.

Julian and Sara slept that first night in the lofted bed of the studio, staring up at the four feet of dark space before the ceiling. The studio—Major called it the Hotel—was a concrete block shed with a bathroom and sink, a hot plate. The air inside was wet and the walls cool, with a vent to the outside that skittered with mice. The blanket Major had given them was thin, a kind of woven acrylic, and they were sweating under it, not touching. There was curry on both their breaths from the foil pouches of lentils Major had boiled in water and served with plain spaghetti noodles.

"How long do you think those swimming pools have been empty?" Sarah said.
"It's sort of spooky."

"It'll be fine for two weeks, yeah?" Julian asked. "An adventure?"

"Of course," Sara said. "I like it here. I do. It's weird."

"Do you like him?" Julian asked, his voice neutral.

"Major? Sure," Sara said, blinking into the darkness. "Sure, he's a character, right?"

"Mm," Julian mumbled, arranging her arm across his chest. "Get him to tell you his abalone-diving stories." He reached over and pressed his fingers into her pubic hair but didn't say anything else. Sara shifted a little so her legs parted, and Julian started to move his fingers idly inside of her. She reached over to take his penis in her hand.

"Ouch," Julian said suddenly, pushing her hand away. "Your nail. You scratched me."

"Sorry," Sara said. They were both quiet for a moment.

Julian sighed. "I'm just hot. Here, give me." He took Sara's finger to his mouth, lining his teeth up to delicately bite her fingernail. He spit the little half-moon onto the covers.

In the morning, as she filled the kettle at the studio's small sink, Sara watched through the window as Major, shirtless to the waist, carried a garbage bag out of the main house. After hoisting the trash into the can, he bent to the dogs and roughed under their chins, both at once. They put their pink tongues out, heaving with gratitude.

"It's freezing outside," Sara said, turning to Julian and zipping up her sweatshirt. "And your cousin is walking around half-naked."

"Major's nuts," Julian said, typing on his laptop. He stopped to squint at the screen. "I'm going to have to buy an airport card." He looked up at Sara and smirked.

"I'm just surprised he's still living like this. When I was thirteen he tried to teach me to siphon gas from parked cars—"

"You, a gas thief?" Sara snorted, thinking of how Julian watched his speedometer so nervously, constantly imagining cops in the rearview. "Go on."

"God," Julian said. "I was so bad at it."

"How does he even make money?"

"Who knows. Drugs sometimes, I imagine. Abalone diving. Odd jobs."

"Where's his wife?"

"Don't know. I didn't know if she'd be here. They fight."

"I wonder if she's gone."

Julian shrugged.

"He didn't say anything about her to you?"

"No," Julian scoffed. "Major confiding in me—ha. I bet he thinks I'm the one whose life is falling apart."

"Really?"

"Oh god, yeah. Living in Smog City, traffic, evils of television, pesticide food, whatever. But please—he's just like his family. They criticize you, but then they want what you have. They borrowed twenty thousand bucks from my parents when I was little."

"Jeez," Sara breathed. She peered out the window again but the yard was empty, just the dogs stirring by the door of the main house. "Did Major know?"

"Of course. A few days after my parents gave them the first check, he took me out to the park and punched me in the face. No explanation. My first fight. I was twelve."

"Did you hit him back?"

Julian paused. "No," he said. "He was, what, seventeen?"

The image came to Sara, unwanted, of Julian as a young boy, his face mottled with a black eye. She didn't like to think of him like that. Like someone defeated. She willed the image away, and reached across for Julian's hand.

"Did you tell your parents?"

Julian shook his head, not returning the press of Sara's hand. "They love Major. He was living in our spare room. I told them it was some guy at school." He snorted. "They asked Major to watch out for me."

Sara squeezed his hand hard. She wished he hadn't told her.

"What?" Julian said.

"I just love you," Sara said. "Is it okay that we're here?"

"Oh yeah, yeah," Julian said, pulling his hand away. "All that was a long time ago." He gestured at the cheap paper-covered lantern over the table, the fringed sarong draped on the drooping floral couch, and smiled. "We're both a lot different now."

To walk into town would be too far, Major had said after breakfast, but Sara could walk down Frates Road and loop around if it was exercise she wanted. "You know," he'd said, wagging his brows. "To keep in shape." She smiled, and when she turned to go, she walked slowly.

Sara was wearing Julian's too-big down coat, and it muffled her movements, suspending her in a loose warmth. The stony oaks were black over the road, the hills an electric green, and it was good to be alone, to walk the roads with their wooden houses

built on stilts, planted with honeysuckle and rosemary bushes, the cars in the driveways shrouded in their plastic covers. Sara could feel the beginnings of a panic that wasn't altogether negative. It had to do with being here, in Sebastopol, with wanting to take the hard edges out of her life, to live again as she had in high school, under the sweet and limited boundaries of the world. No grant exhibitions, no deadlines except the unending cycle of weekends and weekdays. What would she have to do to assuage this panic? Following pure logic, she would move back home. She would fill her life with known entities—bicycling the roads of her hometown, eating her mother's same meals.

It struck her suddenly that maybe Julian wanted to come back to this place because he felt the same way. That they were both scared. The thought unsettled her; she had chosen him partly for what she'd thought of as stability—his house in Silverlake almost paid for, the ordered calm of his kitchen. The weekly gym visits. A housekeeper even, just monthly, but still. He had been anxious in the truck on the whole drive up, though, she felt that. And last night, he'd seemed jittery, not falling asleep easily. But it was only two weeks, she told herself, two weeks here and the installation would be finished and things would be on track again.

When she got back to the house their truck was gone but Major's four-door was still in the driveway. The dogs were sleeping against each other on the porch, and the bigger one stirred when Sara knocked on the glass door.

"Julian went to get food," Major said, leaning against the doorframe. His hair was pulled into a ponytail at his neck and his eyes seemed darker than before. "Probably sushi

or something," Major smirked. Sara smiled at the joke too, pushing away a quick pang of guilt at the collusion. Major slid the door open wider. "Want some quesadillas?"

Sara wandered from the lace curtains at the window to the pine dining table, permanently set with woven placemats. She picked up a colored glass cup and put it down again.

"My wife is getting her Pilates certification, like with those machines. They look like torture devices," Major said from the stove. He was heating a tortilla over the flame of the burner, pinching it with his fingers to flip it over. The tortilla bubbled from the heat, and he quickly tossed it onto a plate and replaced it with another.

"So she likes that kind of thing," Major said, gesturing to the glass cup Sara had picked up. "She boils our water then adds, like, sulfite flakes to charge the cells. So you know, the cup. It's orange so it's supposed to cure asthma. When you drink from it."

Sara couldn't tell whether Major was being serious, so she kept looking around in a way she hoped was curious and not rude. There was an empty pretzel jar full of keys on a shelf. Next to the jar was a picture of Major as a younger man, handsome, his arm around a redheaded woman in a Giants sweatshirt.

"I know I said it already, but truly, thank you for this," Sara said. "I really appreciate it. Julian does too. We both do."

Major grunted a little.

"I don't know if he said thank you yet," Sara continued. "But he's really grateful."

"Oh, it's fine," Major said. "What else would I do? Family's important. You take care of each other." He turned off the burner and rewrapped a block of cheese in plastic. "Or something like that. We can eat in the backyard. Al fresco, as they say."

There were wet leaves stuck to the metal chairs outside and Sara tucked her hand into her sleeve and brushed it across the surface before sitting down. They ate next to the drained Watsu pool, with piles of gravel and leaves collecting in its corners.

"I got to clean up better around here. I know it," Major said, passing her a paper plate.

"It's great," Sara said. "Really. Thanks for this, smells good."

She ate three salty quesadillas and drank one Coke and half of another. She hadn't had soda in at least two years, she thought. Julian hated it. She'd forgotten how good it tasted, the pure carbonated fizz. Above them were the oily clouds of January, low-hanging, and she felt the chill of the chair through her jeans.

"So," Major cleared his throat. "You're gonna put those bleachers up soon?"

"Oh god," Sara said, laughing a little. Major looked at her, caught off guard.

"Sorry, I'm just laughing because—I just keep forgetting about the project. It's not that serious, you know. You can take them down as soon as I take pictures of it."

"It is going to be bleachers, right? Julian tried to tell me when he called."

"Sounds really stupid when you say it, huh?" Sara drained her second Coke. She felt queasy but good, wanting to talk. "It's kind of about how people want nature to do something for them. Like everyone always going to the beach. Especially in LA. I always think, well, here we are at the beach. Now what?"

Major nodded. "Sure."

"You think I'm full of shit, don't you? City cousin and his little girlfriend come up north to build a so-called art piece."

Major grinned and trailed one of his big fingers slowly through the salt and oil on his plate. "Oh, I don't know much about art. The guy down the street makes big tin animals. Sells 'em for a thousand bucks, whatever."

"Oh Jesus. Tin animals. My next project after this." Major was quiet, so she kept talking. "I'm a little worried about this grant. They haven't been in contact with me for a month. I'm thinking about not doing the project."

"Really?"

"That's the first time I've actually said it out loud. And I guess it's a joke, you know. But I think about it."

Major regarded her carefully. "You're so close to doing it. Why not finish?"

"Ha. Why not finish? I don't know." She shook her Coke can. "It's like those disaster movies, where everyone's getting chased, outrunning volcanoes. They jump into the plane as the runway crumbles under them, they keep running and running, and they live. I always think, me, I would just sit down. I would think, I don't want the anxiety of trying to live if I have to run all the time. I'd rather get swallowed into the crumbling highway or killed by the murderer or whatever. I think that's what I think about when I think about quitting." Major smiled at her, and Sara smiled back. "That's the short answer."

"What's Julian writing?" Major asked.

"The script?" Sara paused for a minute. "I guess it's a kind of dark romance. This guy becomes obsessed with this girl and starts building these elaborate, well, stage sets, you know, so he can act out this love. And the girl has no idea, really, that this is going on—" Sara stopped. "I'm probably not the best person to ask. You should ask him. He could explain much better."

"Does the girl ever love him back?" Major asked. "At the end?"

"I don't know. He hasn't written the end yet."

"Huh. Baby cousin writing movies."

"I'm proud of him," Sara said. Her own voice sounded queer to herself. "Very. He works really hard."

She started getting to her feet to gather the plates and cans. Major, still at the table, pulled his hair out of the ponytail and raked his fingers hard against his scalp.

"Ah," he sighed voluptuously, scratching hard. "This is heaven."

"Listen," Major continued, still scratching. "I'm going to the beach to dive, Tuesday morning. Abalone, you know. You should come." He smirked again, like he had earlier. "If Julian can leave his work. It's nice at the ocean. You can practice—for your art. Wait for the sunrise or something. See what happens."

"What's going to happen?"

Major shrugged. "I don't know. You're the artist. You tell me."

It was five AM when the three of them left the house. The sky was dark still, but the sun would rise before they got to the coast. Major drove. Sara tapped the handle of the car door absent-mindedly, Julian messing with the radio dial from the passenger seat

while the salt air came through the truck vents, tinged with proteins. Dampness settled on the land the closer they got to the ocean, swaths of tufted tulle fog between the wooden houses, the cows, the country high school's letters spelled out weak and big on the hillside.

"You're seriously going into the water?" Julian asked when they'd parked the car in the beach lot.

"Sure," Major said. He opened the door to dump the dregs of coffee from a mug, then turned up the heater and looked back at Sara, making a face she couldn't interpret.

Outside the car, Major stripped under a towel he'd wrapped around his waist, and stepped into a wetsuit that and smoothed out the crevices of his body. Sara watched him in the rearview mirror as he pulled his hair back into a ponytail, his face alert and open. He put a hood over his ears and gloves on his hands, booties over his feet, and got a running start into the water.

"Insanity," Julian said, as they watched him. "In-sane."

"He still calls her his wife," Sara said.

"What?" Julian shifted in his seat to look at Sara. "What are you talking about?"

"Major's wife," she said, opening her book. "He said, my wife. Yesterday. So they're still together."

Julian stared at her. "So what?"

"So where is she?"

"Why do you care?"

Was she imagining the sharpness in his voice? "Forget it," she said. "I just thought it was weird. Turn the heater down. I can't even breathe."

Sara looked up from her book forty minutes later to see Major smiling hugely, coming towards the car with something that looked like a stone. It was covered in whorls and barnacles, with crusty flakes of flaming red and gray filaments veining the surface.

Julian was asleep in the passenger seat, making the snuffling sounds that sometimes kept her awake at night.

"Julian," Sara said. "Wake up, he's back. He got something."

When Julian didn't respond, she reached over the seat to shake his shoulder, surprised to feel that he still had his seatbelt buckled.

When Major broke the abalone over a rock, black jelly meat slipped out onto the sand, getting a crust like a sugar doughnut. He showed Julian how to cook it up on a camping grill over a chunk of purple Madrone while Sara shivered on the picnic table, pulling her arms into her sweatshirt and hugging her knees.

The meat was strange tasting, bland and big in Sara's mouth, like a second tongue. "That's eighty bucks," Major told Sara, shrugging on his jeans, unballing his socks from his Nikes. His ankles were bright white under a lattice of dark hair. "They fry these up with some kind of sauce, whatever, sell them for way more." He twirled his fingers around his head. "Crazy people in this world."

"Isn't it crazy to dive too?" Julian asked. His hands were pink with cold, and his voice was small against the constant din of waves. "Don't people die?"

Major grinned, patient, and looked at the sky. "Money," he said. "It's good money."

"It must be nice to go into the water. I like abalone," Sara said, balling up a paper napkin. She smiled at Major. Julian cut a quick look at her. "Abalone tastes like nothing," she continued.

"God," Julian scoffed. "You would like something that tastes like nothing."

"Sometimes you just want the pure fact of food," Sara said. Another car pulled into the parking lot; surfers, their boards sticking out of the rolled-down windows, public radio turned up loud. Julian watched them get out of the car, but Major kept his eyes on hers.

After lunch, Julian and Sara worked in the woodshop Major had set up in the garage, Sara drilling sinkholes and sleuthing out the right size screws from a coffee can, while Julian, gaping from behind goggles, had the table saw running, the room full of the clattering noise of it.

"Fuck," he said, pulling his goggles off his face. He'd taken a woodworking class in school, she knew, but he was struggling, working too fast, burning the two by fours so that the garage took on the acrid smell of smoke. Sara had already finished most of the sinkholes and couldn't do the rest until Julian was done cutting. The garage door was open to the afternoon, and she could see the main house, the dogs in their eternal sleepy watch. Major had left for town when they'd all come back from the coast, not even bothering to shower. His hair and eyebrows still had a faint crust of salt from the ocean. Sara had leaned against Julian, breathing against the sweet clean skin above his collar, letting him rub her back.

"Hey!" Julian had yelled, trotting up to Major's car before it pulled away. "If you go to Safeway, can you get more water? With the yellow label?"

"Not going to Safeway," Major had said out his window, lifting his hand in a salute.

Julian's frame hunched awkwardly over the saw. She nudged open the lid of one of the cardboard boxes that lined the perimeter of the garage; books. The next one was full of bolts of fabric, folded paper garlands ripped at their creases. Primitive wooden spoons, only half-carved, a few hairy tennis balls bleached white from the sun. She found a rope of woven fabric that she tied around her wrist, an enamel barrette she put in her pocket, clicking it open and closed.

When Major came back, he headed up to the main house, then noticed Sara at the garage door. He said something, but Sara couldn't hear over the noise of the still-running saw.

"Kath," he said as she came closer, "Kath's coming for dinner."

Sara smiled because that seemed like the right thing to do. She could feel the edges of the barrette in her pocket. "Who's Kath?"

He looked at her strangely. "My wife," he said. "Who else? She's bringing Olivia." When Sara shook her head, confused, Major said, "Her daughter. Olivia."

"You have a daughter?" Sara laughed at how stupid the question sounded, but Major didn't smile.

"She's not mine," he said. "Tell Julian dinner's at seven."

Back inside the garage, Sara blinked, reeling from the sudden dark. She closed the top of the box she'd been looking through last, folding the flaps over the clutter of empty prescription bottles, the packages of unopened Mary Kay moisturizer. Julian was still working, concentrating hard, and it took him a minute to see Sara at his side, waving her hand at him to stop.

"Why didn't you tell me he has a daughter?" Sara hissed when Julian finally turned the saw off.

"What?" he said, squinting, rubbing his nose where the goggles had left a mark.

"Major," she said, and wondered if it was the first time she'd said his name out loud. "Major and Kath."

"I didn't know," Julian said, holding up his hands. "How would I know?"

"Didn't your parents tell you?"

"Maybe they don't know either. Why is it such a big deal?" He peered at her, studying her face.

"I'm fine," Sara mumbled, shaking her head. "I just don't get why he didn't tell you."

"We aren't close, Sara." Julian spoke very slowly. "Major and I are not close. I'm only here to help you, okay? This is all for you." He lifted an uncut board and let it fall heavily—it clapped so loud against the worktable that Sara jumped. "I wouldn't be here otherwise."

"I know," Sara said, trying to soothe him with a low voice, "Alright. I know. I just wondered."

"I don't like having to ask him for things, okay? I don't like him cooking for us, I don't like—" Julian stuttered, overcome. He gestured at the table saw. "He should just cut these. I'm sure he'd be done by now."

"Oh come on," Sara said, "don't be dramatic." She let out a high-pitched laugh, and Julian winced.

"You keep asking about him."

"So?" Sara's voice was unnaturally bright. "You never talked about him before."

"Why do you think that is?" He seemed pained. "He was an asshole, Sara. He took things from me. It wasn't nice being his cousin. You don't know."

"I'm sorry," Sara said. "I'm sorry," she said again. "I should've been better."

"How old?" Julian said, tightly. "The daughter?"

"I don't know. She's coming. The wife and the daughter. Tonight."

"Great," Julian groaned. "How fun."

"She's not his," Sara said, quietly. "It's some other guy's."

"Oh boy," Julian laughed. He looked half-crazy, sweat pricking his nose, rimming his mouth. "These people," he said finally, pulling his goggles back on. His eyes were magnified and watery behind the pocked plastic lenses.

"Thanks for doing this," Sara said, reaching out to play with the fingers of his right hand. She turned his palm upwards and lay her hand in his. "Really."

"I would never not help you, Sara." He looked young in the goggles. Julian pulled her close, putting his arm around her and pinching a bit at the skin around her waist and she tried to arrange her face like this was something that felt good.

That night there was a hard glitter in the air. Sara wore her nicest shirt, made of almost see-through linen, and she kept pulling the hem down, her hands strangely cool and bloodless. Kath was supposed to have come at six, but it was past eight and Major insisted they eat.

"It's fine," he said, his voice bright. "She's coming, she'll be here, but we can't wait that long to eat, not good for the digestion."

Julian kept dropping food off his fork, and he laughed when he spilled beans down the front of his shirt. Sara passed him a napkin, wrinkling her nose, and he grabbed it, too quick. Major kept looking back and forth between them, taking draws of his beer with a glassy remove.

"So how long till the project's started?" Major asked.

"Soon," Sara said. "Should be able to put up some of it in a few days, maybe."

"A few days?" Julian laughed quickly. "I don't think anything's going to be ready then. Unless Major wants to finish cutting those boards after dinner." He took a drink.

"And I have to work on the script."

Sara smiled hard at him. "I'm grateful you're helping. So grateful." She looked up at Major. "I kind of picked a project that is beyond my skill level. It was stupid of me. I'm sorry, again. I really am."

"I just haven't got a lot done," Julian said, glancing at Major.

"I can cut the boards for you," Major said.

Sara shook her head. "No, god, we're already living here and using your tools.

"It's not a big deal. I wouldn't have offered otherwise."

Julian picked at his food, spearing a single bean on his fork. Sara watched him, then shrugged. "No, no," she said. "Julian's got it covered."

They all ate slowly but couldn't drag dinner past forty minutes. Major got up first, stretching. "Well," he said, "I'll make a plate for the stragglers, huh?" He patted Julian on the back. "Pour your lady some whiskey, let's all have a drink."

"Let me do the dishes," Sara said, gathering the plates. "You two sit. Talk."

Sara stayed a long time at the sink, letting the water run so hot it steamed and reddened her hands. It felt good to turn each cup under the faucet, each plate, to stack them neatly in the drying rack. This was achievement, this was recognizable. The plate was dirty, then clean. At the window over the sink, there was a folded paper star that probably lit up prettily in the daytime sun. It wouldn't be bad to live here. To go to town three times a week. To do the dishes and feed the white dogs, to walk the Frates Road loop and cook Major his big blunt meals. She heard Major and Julian talking but didn't really listen, letting their conversation soften around her.

She did hear the car on the gravel, though, a car that came up the driveway, idled for a moment, and drove away. Sara shut off the water, drying her hands against her jeans.

Major walked slowly to the window and lifted the curtain gently to look out. He sighed and caught Sara's eyes. For a moment, Sara could see in him the young man he'd been in the photograph, hair fuller, laughing. Then the door opened and a woman came in, holding a child in her arms.

"Hello," the woman said, looking around. She was thin and freckled, with a high forehead and sharply parted red hair that went down to her waist. She wore a man's shirt buttoned to the neck over jeans and moccasins. "Who are you?" the woman asked Sara and Julian. The baby was damp and drugged looking in the woman's arms, wearing a too-big sweatsuit.

Major straightened up and laughed a little, going past Sara to the sink and filling a glass with water from the drying rack.

"Julian and Sara, Kath," Major said, his back to all of them. "I told you they'd be here for a while."

Sara waved awkwardly at Kath, who smiled an airless smile and repositioned Olivia in her arms.

"I'm Sara," she said, wishing Julian would get up. "That's Julian."

Julian started to rise, then sat down again and waved from the table.

"I know you," Kath said, pointing at Julian. "I met you. Didn't I?" she asked Major. "Didn't I meet him?" Major didn't respond, still at the sink with his back to Kath. Sara saw the water from the faucet fill and overflow his glass.

"Say hi to Daddy," Kath said, jiggling Olivia. "Hi to daddy."

"You didn't say you'd be late," Major muttered over the sink. "Who dropped you off just now?"

"Shit, you could say hi first." Kath's eyes were aimed at Major's back, doglike.

"I'm sorry, the store was closed. So we're late."

Major drank the glass of water then started filling the glass again. Kath laughed

"No," Major said, before Sara could speak. "We all ate, Kath. We're finished. We're all done."

"Oh well," Kath cooed into Olivia's ear. "They all ate, huh, baby?"

"There's more food," Julian said. He waved his glass. "Major cooked, it was really good."

"He's a good cook," Kath said. Olivia shifted in Kath's arms and started to whimper. Sara went to move her coat off the chair so Kath could sit, but Kath started handing Olivia to her. "Can you hold her for a minute?" Kath said, Olivia already half in Sara's arms.

"Oh—well, uh, sure," Sara said, as she took on the warm weight of the girl. Olivia clutched at her neck. "Hi there, babe," Sara said to Olivia's hair. "Hi Olivia." Everyone went quiet, and Sara cleared her throat. "Let's take Olivia out to pet the dogs, okay?" she said to Julian.

When Sara turned to shut the screen door behind her, she saw that Kath was standing next to Major now, his arm around her thin shoulders. Major's face was set and serious, but Kath was leaning into him, playing with his collar, and Sara could see how his body leaned back. When Major handed Kath a plate of food, she ate it without a fork, sucking her fingers and shaking back her hair.

Julian sat down heavily on one of the metal chairs on the porch, while Sara and Olivia sat on the wooden bench that rocked back and forth. It was dark out, overcast, and there were no stars, only the diffuse socket of the moon behind the clouds.

"The baby's cold," Sara said, trying to huddle Olivia to her chest. "What kind of person dresses their child like this in January?"

Julian shrugged. He was getting drunk, she could tell, maybe already was, and he leaned back, staring up at the sky with a dreamy glaze.

"You're looking up like there's something to look at. It's cloudy. Nothing to see." Sara had meant it as a joke, but there wasn't anything soft in her voice and Julian just looked confused. She tried again; "So you don't have to look up, is what I'm saying."

Julian closed his eyes. "There. Now I'm not looking at anything."

The silence between them grew. "What do you think of all this?"

He opened one eye. "Of all what? Olivia?"

"Yeah."

Julian opened both eyes and sat up. "I'd heard my parents talk about some trouble but everyone's so vague. And no one's been out here for years. Why would they? Major likes to be alone."

Olivia was getting anxious, throwing her head back against Sara's chest. Sara had to hold her more tightly.

"With good reason," Julian said. "If I lived like this, I wouldn't let anyone around either."

"Whose baby is it?" Sara asked quietly.

"God, who cares? It's not his, that's all." He sighed.

Sara heard it first. Julian stopped talking, and started laughing.

"No way. They're fucking right now, aren't they?"

"I don't think so," Sara said. The sounds got louder.

She froze. Julian started laughing in a way she'd never seen, his hands pressed hard against his face. She looked away. The baby in her arms. Her and Julian, out here by these empty pools under the sky with no stars. Sara kept her feet on the ground, rocking the swing so she and Olivia were moving in the darkness. She knew was going to have to get up, sooner or later, but there was no reason to stop until she had to.

REYKJAVIK

"Reykjavik, Mom," Miranda said. "Ra-ke-ye-avec. Just say it like that."

Krisanne tried to echo the word back, hitting the vowels awkwardly from the twin bed next to Miranda's.

"It's easy," Miranda said. "Just think, Ra-ke-ye-avec."

"Wreck-e-veck?" Krisanne ventured.

"Forget it," Miranda said. "I thought Iceland was supposed to be light for twenty-four hours." Miranda got up on her knees and looked out the one window in their thin-walled room. It was three in the morning, and the sky was washed to a liquid cerulean. The lines of the nearby mountain range were still distinct, and she wouldn't need a flashlight if she went outside, but it was nothing like the endless sun Miranda had prepared for with sleeping pills and an eye mask borrowed from her girlfriend. Ex-girlfriend, now. It was afternoon in Oakland, and Hilary was probably napping on the couch in the sunroom. David would be in the kitchen, maybe. Finishing lunch. Or maybe they were fucking.

"This is nothing like the website said." Miranda folded herself back under the covers, adjusting the flat pillow. "And why does Johanna dress like this is Palm Springs?"

Johanna, who owned the horse farm, wore chenille slippers gone thin at the soles, and sloppy housedresses that slipped grotesquely off her shoulders and exposed her skin to the constant August storms. Outside the main house, the wind kept the clothes on the line in a perfect whipping salute. Inside, Johanna swanned around barefoot, bringing out platters of gravy and potatoes, milky soup, and white bread for the tour group. Her daughter, Claire, haunted the place like a dull dog, lying on her back on the bench in front of the broken piano, or peering around the corner from the hallway, watching with a rag in her hand for spills at the table.

"And I'm sorry," Miranda continued. "But the daughter freaks me out. She does." Miranda looked over at her mother, waiting for a reply, she saw Krisanne had fallen back asleep, hands wedged into a fat John Grisham, her face wet with moisturizer.

Miranda and Krisanne had been in Iceland for three days, and there would be for five more. The trip had been Krisanne's idea: she was about to move to Italy for a year with her boyfriend, Steve, a teacher at a language school in Florence.

"You'll be the only one of us Rulands left in the States," her mother had said. "All by yourself. That's a big deal. And you can distract yourself. The Hilary stuff." Krisanne had flashed a smile, and fluffed herself, adjusting her dark hair, highlighted with segments of blonde, the ends crispy-looking. "Your mother's not so bad, huh? Free trip to Iceland. We'll have a blast. Iceland's very hip right now for artists."

Miranda didn't tell her mother that she didn't want to go Iceland, that she'd only talked about taking a vacation in an idle way. That she was no artist. When Krisanne found out that Hilary had left her for a man, she furrowed her forehead. "Do they do that

often?" she asked. A week later, Miranda got the email: two plane tickets to Reykjavik, a weeklong horseback tour. "Girl's trip," Krisanne had written in the subject line, in all-caps. She could imagine her mother typing the note, pleased with her imagined solution. In truth, Krisanne had never really understood what Miranda might want. She thought of the six-hundred-dollar telescope, still in its box, that Krisanne and Steve had bought her for Christmas.

There were six other people on the horseback tour—a German mother and daughter, a group of three silent high schoolers from Munich, and an older Austrian man, ruddy in performance gear. The drive from the Reykjavik airport was long, and Miranda slept, folded over the backpack in her lap. When she woke, blinking and thick-tongued, she was alone in the van. She jerked upright—the van was parked in front of a series of wooden cabins and a main lodge. A meadow abutted a mountain range, pitted and snow-streaked like a glacier. A long stretch of grass and a distant highway. When she stumbled out, shouldering her backpack, she saw her mother on the porch of one of the cabins. The group of high schoolers, their skinny legs in tight jeans below their bright fleece jackets, were gathered around Krisanne and two new people, Krisanne in full-on vaudeville mode.

"And it was *Sharon Stone*," she heard her mother coo, and the girls laughed, one stomping her tidy European boots on the porch in pleasure.

"Honey!" Krisanne yelled, waving at Miranda. "Come on. Come see. The toilets flush with a button!" When Miranda sighed, reshouldering her pack, Krisanne turned back to the group. "See, just like I said! Isn't she just like I said?"